

Stragglers

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Summary: Set between the events of Mad Max and Mad Max 2, this story focuses on a new character and his experiences of the End. Resources are running out, but that's not his biggest concern...

1. Chapter 1

This has been a side project of mine which has been on the back burner for a while. Once again, if people want more then I will complete the story (there is already plenty more done). Feedback appreciated!

Welcome, that's what the sign said. It made me stop for a second to think, which I hardly ever do. These days, welcome is a dead word; there's no use for it, and nobody says it. Someone should sit down with a dictionary and go through scribbling out all the useless words. Words like government, peace, tranquillity, safety, power and education, to name a few. I chucked the sign back to where it was, the dust off the road kicking up into the air. The sun was starting to sink its way beneath the horizon, so I pressed on towards the vanishing point of the road ahead of me, leaving the gas station in my wake.

>I had found a good place to hold out for the night which, ironically, was a fuel tanker. I knew it was empty though. They always are and most of them have suffered some unfortunate mishap to end up where they were. This one had had its tires blown out and judging by the faded tire marks on the road, had then crashed into a rocky outcrop. As for the driver, well what's left of him was slumped over in the cab. Long story short, he didn't die quickly. I climbed up to the open hatch on the tanker and dropped down inside. Signs of a previous occupant were scattered on the floor. An old sleeping bag, plus empty bean tins and, remarkably, a wind up radio. The thing still worked once I had spent 2 minutes spinning the handle, but as I expected no signals of any sort to detect. I opened my bag and laid Lucy and Annabelle on the floor next to me. Next followed my daily routine. Check Lucy and Annabelle over for any wear and tear, followed by a strip down and deep clean. Reassemble and ready in case

of a disturbance. Then I jumped up and surveyed my surroundings, and planned 2 escape routes if my position was compromised. Once I was satisfied, I settled down for the night.
The night passed without incident, save for the howl of wolves off in the distance. I gathered my things and set off. The sun was trying to battle its way through the clouds, to no avail. Dust devils snaked their way across the dry dead fields to my left, almost as if they were actual beings, hunting in a pack. I watched them for a minute as they twirled around the plain, until they disappeared. I could see something through the heat haze in the distance. Picking up Lucy, I looked through the scope. It was a burning car. Not good. Last time I checked, cars don't just spontaneously combust, there needs to be an outside factor. So something " or someone " had started that fire. I think I know which one it was. I sprinted off the road and dived into a drainage ditch. The stench was unbearable, but I had smelt worse. I crawled my way along the ditch, and into a pipe, which ran back diagonally under the road in front of me. As I was carefully making my way towards the light at the other side, I suddenly heard voices.

>"There's no one around, it was a waste of matches" one said.
"Matt, I'm telling you I saw something walking down the middle of the road" replied the other.
"And I'm telling you there's no one here. It's probably you seeing things from not taking the meds."
"Fuck you, I feel fine."

>"Whatever, I'm off to take a leak; don't do anything stupid."
Leaning out of the pipe, I looked back to where the voices had originated from. There were two guys, one older than the other. The younger one had dark brown matted hair, looked about 5'10", I'd guess around 25 years old. Judging by the state of the other one, he could be 40 " 50, looking at the long grey beard, and heavy limp he had. I waited until the older one, Matt, had slipped out of view, then crept out onto the embankment. The younger one was high, no doubt about it. I could see from here that his eyes were bloodshot, and he kept craning his neck to look at the sky. I looked up to try to see what he was staring at " nothing. There never is anything in the sky these days, save for the occasional bird or cloud. Finding a comfortable enough spot to lie prone I rested Lucy against the verge, corrected my breathing and pulled the trigger. There was a slight jolt as she released the dart, its sleek black mass streaking across the void between me and the man. It entered his ear canal almost bang on centre, as if it was designed for that very purpose. There was a slight crunching noise as it drove home. He let out a slight grunt and sagged forward back onto his makeshift bed, and lay still. Perfect. I vaulted the crash barrier and ran over to their camp. There was not a lot which caught my eye, although they did have a compass, which I grabbed, then hid behind the burning car. A couple of minutes later, give or take, the older man returned.

>"Heh, you sure you were feeling ok?" he said to the corpse.
"Out like a light you are. Here, let me cover you up."
>He stood up and grabbed an old blanket, and went over to place it over the man. I mirrored his movements, until I was stood right behind him. As he lent down to pull it up over the guy's shoulders, he noticed the little black dart protruding from the ear.
"What the fuck is this?"

>He started pulling it out, and with a sickening squelch it came free. He grimaced as he looked at the gore stuck on the end of it. Spinning round, he unclipped his pistol from its holster. He saw me and froze.
When someone points a gun at you, you have a split second to evaluate their actions. Luckily in situations like this,

your body gives you a little help whether you like it or not. With adrenalin flooding your bloodstream and rushing around your body, you are able to react to things quicker than normal. In this instant I was able to look at his weapon, a rusted Bren Ten, and see that there was no threat. The trouble with firearms, especially guns, is that they need regular maintenance. Failure to maintain a weapon will result in death: either from the weapon misfiring and killing you or being killed by something else. This man had failed to maintain his weapon, as the firing pin was so bent it looked like it had melted. I smiled and took a step towards him, raising Lucy to my shoulder.

"What do you want from us?" he shouted. The pistol began to wobble in his hand he was shaking so much.

>"Us? Your friend is dead."
"I-I-I have gas! Here, let me get it!" he pleaded, nodding to two corroded oil drums lying on their side. If they had gas, they wouldn't be here.

>"I checked anyway, but I know that's a lie. But I'll make you an offer, as I'm in a good mood."
He dropped the pistol by his feet.

>"Whatever you need, just let me live, please!"
"I want my dart back."

>He looked down at the bloody dart in his hand. He handed it over and ran off over the hill. I let him go and carried on walking. Some people act so tough and grizzly when they have are in control. Take that control away from them and they are usually cowards.
"Stupid son of a bitch, turn around so I can watch you die."

>I raised my hands and turned slowly around to face him. The man who had just run off was leaning on the roof of the flaming car, aiming the pistol right at me. I looked him dead in the eyes and laughed. He pulled the trigger and there was a thunk as the firing pin caught the back of the gun. He looked down at it in horror, then the fuel tank of the burning car ignited. A fireball tore up through the interior, and out the windows. Straight into the man's torso. He screamed and tried to roll around on the road to try and put out the blaze, but a fire that big wasn't going to go out easily. I turned my back on the scene, reloaded Lucy, and resumed my journey towards nowhere.<p>

End of Chapter 1

2. Chapter 2

Due to popular demand, here is Chapter 2!

Rather ironically, all the nut-jobs carrying placards saying "The End of the World Is Nigh", or building homemade bunkers filled with supplies were right. The world did end. However, it wasn't one of the classic apocalypses which you see in films, like a plague, or nuclear war. It was actually something much simpler, much more realistic, but could have been prevented as we had all seen it coming.

>We all knew that petrol didn't grow on trees. It wasn't renewable and other sources of energy were either depleted or just not strong enough to cope with the world demand. So when petrol began running out people turned to the world's leading scientists for a solution. But there wasn't one. We were burning through it too fast, and there was not enough time to come up with an alternative. The last of the petrol dried up. Lights across the globe started going out. At first there was disbelief, and then the panic drove home. Crime rates exploded, and riots were striking up everywhere. Word got out that

the United Nations each had a month's supply of the resource, but even that didn't last. Alongside the main issue of no power, other side effects started appearing. Crops were failing all over the globe. Hospitals became inundated with sickness and death. Before long the death count was climbing fast, and famine and plagues were spreading.
But that was all 11 years ago. These days, things aren't as bad as they were. Sure there was still no fuel of any sorts, but the plagues had died out, so there was still hope. I had even heard of a haven somewhere up north which offered almost every attribute of the world before The Outtage. Security, medicine, shelter. Power. Although to be honest I doubted that last one. But any rumour was hope these days, so I was gradually making my way there. I passed an old farmhouse with what appeared to be the remains of a solar panel on the roof. Once the National Grid went offline those able to generate their own electricity seemed to be in the clear. What they didn't expect was the mobs of thieves and scavengers who would take their precious generators by force.

>I strolled over to the house. It was clear from here that most of the roof had been ripped off, as tiles littered the yard. The guttering hung like dead limbs off the sides of the house. Inside the situation had gotten worse. Anything that could be burned for fuel and heat was stripped from the interior. Even the floorboards and beams from above my head. Bullet holes scarred the walls; broken glass and splinters crunched under foot. Did the owners abandon their home when they saw the horde of angry people? Or did they try to hold their ground? Upon making my way out the back door, the answer was there for all to see. Two shallow graves could be seen in the corner of the back garden. Some ragged cloth was exposed from one of the graves, as well as scratch marks and piles of dirt on the earth. Most likely some sort of dog or other animal after what was left.
I spent the next 20 minutes or so searching the house for anything of real value. Either things I could use to trade or things that would benefit me in the long run. The only thing I managed to find was a clean bandage in a smashed first aid box, so I left the ruin and made my way over to the barn. The barn was still intact; a huge wooden shed lurking almost out of sight behind some trees. It was so big it took me 10 minutes to walk around it, looking for a way inside. Then I noticed something, which posed a problem for me. Because it meant that shortly I could be facing my killer. There was an old dead bush, kind of like tumbleweed, only larger and denser. It had been jammed into a small hole dug underneath the wall of the barn. I withdrew my knife "firearms weren't going to help me here" and slowly pulled out the weed. Lifting up the knife, I started moving my arm forwards through the hole. Looking in the reflection of the knife, I could see that the barn was full of straw, but no potential hostiles of any sort.

>However, as I started to edge forwards to move the tumbleweed, the reflection in the knife caught a glimpse of a pair of legs lying on a makeshift mattress. I paused. The first thing to do in a situation like this was to establish whether there was any threats. There was definitely someone in there, but for all I know they could have died some time ago. I watched the body for a few minutes, keeping an eye out for signs of life, but there wasn't any. I squeezed myself past the weed and into the barn. The barn was relatively intact, but completely void of anything useful. There were bare hooks and shelves where equipment had once lived. There were some old boxes up in the hayloft, but I dismissed them as a waste of time trying to get to. Upon reaching the body, I saw an LED lantern just tucked out of sight, sending weird shadows dancing up the walls. Including the shadow of a figure with a shovel arching through the air towards my

silhouette. Then there was nothing.
Consciousness came back to me, then I wished it hadn't. My head felt like it had been caved in, my vision as if I was looking underwater. Jesus this brought back memories of a lost world, of a place where college parties were rife and joyful. This feeling signified that you must have had a serious amount to drink, it was your body's way of saying "YOU feel bad?! Look at the state of your liver!" But this wasn't as a result of alcohol, it was the outcome of a shovel meeting a head.

>"'In desperate times, a man will cast aside all that he knows in his bid for survival'. You know who said that?" a voice said through the waves of pain. His voice was wheezy, as if he had been a heavy smoker. No one is able to smoke these days.
"I have to say I don't."

>"It was me, just now. Get the fuck up."
That was quite funny, I have to admit, but as I went to laugh the pain came back like a storm front.

>"If I stand up, I'm going to pass out and fall right back down again."
He chuckled. "Well, it's a risk you're going to have to take, unless you don't have the balls to face a little pain?"

>I managed to push myself upright and, gritting my teeth through the pain, stood myself up. My vision started to fade to pure whiteness, then it passed. As my vision cleared, I could see extensively the barn's interior. It was an impressive setup. Just in front of the hole under the wall was a tripwire comprised of old fishing wire, which then fed up to the hayloft out of sight. I assume he must have had a loop in the other end to slot his finger through when asleep. There was nothing interesting to loot on the ground floor; it was merely a scene designed to distract anyone daring enough to come in here. The man took a step back to take a further look at me.
"What do you know, you do have some balls," he said. I tried to focus and get a further look at him, but my vision was still blurred. Wincing through the pain I asked:

>"You live here? That why you jumped me?"
He chuckled, placing his hands on his hips.

>"Live is a strong word these days, no one 'lives' anywhere anymore. I would say I survive here."

>"You been here long?"
"Couple of months," he replied, with a grin etched on his face.

>"Months? How have you survived for so long?"
"Let's just say I know how to take care of myself."

>This was concerning. Looking at the man he must be in his late sixties at least, and yet here he was as fit as a man half that age. He was lean, the muscles were quite toned. Surviving in a dilapidated barn living on nothing but dust and stagnant water and looking this good was next to impossible. Unless he isn't alone. I grew very wary of the situation, heading out as soon as I could was the best option. He sensed my discomfort, I could see him glancing at me, evaluating me.
"Got somewhere you need to be? Or do you not enjoy company?" he asked.

>"I don't enjoy the idea of talking to a man surviving with a corpse laid out in such a manner to make it look like it's sleeping."

>He looked over his shoulder to the body. He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye, like he was planning his next move. The mood was tense, the tension clogging up the air. I was fully aware that I might never leave this barn. He replied:
"What makes you think I placed him like that? For all you know he could have died last night."

>"A number of things, actually. The thick layer of crusted dirt and dust on the man's skin and clothes. The whiteness and transparency of

the skin. Oh, and the fact that there is a slice so thick through his neck that you can see his fucking windpipe."
Coincidentally, at that moment I saw a bloodied knife protruding not-quite-hidden from under his bedding in the rafters. Time to go. Going over the options, there really wasn't much else for me to do. He was between me and the hole. If I was getting out of here then he needed dealing with. I placed my right foot back and braced my left ready to charge him, disguising it as if I was just shuffling my feet in the dirt. Then the unexpected happened; the big man just burst into tears, the waterworks, red puffy cheeks, everything.

>"I-I'm sorry but I can't let you leave, I need you!" he sobbed.
"You don't need me for anything, I've seen enough," I replied.

>He reached for his pocket, I instinctively dived back reaching for my knife, but paused as he pulled out a battered piece of paper. He slowly smoothed out the crumples in his hands, the tears falling onto the paper as he gazed at it. He held it out in his hands, then crumpled to his knees and started blubbering.
The paper was a faded photograph of a young toddler sat amongst deep grass and flowers in the wind. She was accompanied by a small chocolate Labrador. It was a beautiful picture. It was a glimpse into the past, into a world where happiness and joy existed in harmony. It was a deep reminder of a time of plenty, where it was believed anything was possible. The man's voice cut through the silence.

>"They came and took her. I tried to hide her but they overpowered me."
I passed the paper back to him.

>"How old is she?"
"She's 15."

>"Hair same as the picture?"
"No it's brown with a streak of white down the side. Does this mean you'll help me?"

>"When did I ever mention helping you? You saw me coming last night, you could have welcomed me in with open arms if you really needed my help. Instead you almost caved my skull in. So why the hell should I help you?"
"I panicked! I thought they were coming back for me!"

>"I know what you're going through; my family were lost during the Blackout. But I'm sorry, I can't trust you. If you're really as caring a father as you're suggesting you'd step aside and let me go."
Accepting defeat, the man's shoulder's sagged and he got to his feet. He slowly walked over to the ladder into the loft. I clambered through the hole and into the fresh air. The sun was just leaving the horizon, like a hot air balloon launching into the sky. I looked for the strip of tarmac that was my guide through these parts and set off. There was a hand on my shoulder. I whirled around, finding the man standing there. He stuffed the photograph in my breast pocket, gave a quick smile and made his way back to the barn.

3. Chapter 3

Chapter 3

The next few hours were strenuous and uncomfortable. I could feel the outline of the crumpled picture through my jacket, and it seemed to be getting heavier by the minute. It didn't help that I was walking through what would have once been a friendly neighbourhood. The foundations of long gone houses were dotted here and there across the plain, whilst those that remained were rotting away or overgrown. Nature was reclaiming lost ground, attempting to rebuild the world as it should have been before the Age of Concrete swept in and took

control. The silence was beginning to get unbearable; at some stages I was almost tempted to break it to keep my clarity and focus. However it became apparent that this neighbourhood was still inhabited. Once or twice I saw a shadowy face at a window, which would then retreat as I returned the stare. Curtains were drawn as I walked passed houses. Why anyone would stay here in this place escaped me. The area gave off a strange eeriness, old swings clanked and creaked in the dry wind. Even the dust devils seemed to steer clear of the place.

>Bearing it no longer, I strode down an alleyway, checked the surrounds for possible hostiles, then removed the picture. Being out in the daylight gave me a better perspective of the picture. The girl was wearing a blue polkadot dress, with little brown lace up shoes. She was smiling up at the camera, with her hand petting the back of the dog's head. A tear ran down my cheek. I caught it with my finger, then held it up to look at it in the light. I daren't remember the last time I had tears in my eyes; it causes too many emotions that have been suppressed for so long to bubble up to the surface. Anger. Sorrow. Happiness.
The trash can at the end of the alley crashed over and rolled a few feet. The noise was deafening in the silence, birds nearby abandoned the trees. I dropped to a crouch and pulled Lucy from off my back. I cocked the string, loaded a dart and looked through the sights. A scrawny fox hobbled around the corner. It had a look of desperation in his eyes, as if it had a will to keep going. I pondered shooting it " there was no meat on it, plus the pelt appeared to be crawling with flies and disease. The air filled with the sounds of miniature wings. The fox to me was a perfect portrayal of our world, present day. Previously it had been a strong, adaptable thing of beauty; now after the Blackout it was a shell of its former self, the beauty and strength now lost, yet the yearning to keep going was still there. I pulled out a slice of an apple I had found in an orchard a couple of days before, and tossed it over. The fox bolted a few yards, then came back, its nose leading first. It hunkered down to scoop it into its mouth, chewed and swallowed it. It trotted back to the corner, looked back as if in thanks, then left.

>I picked up the photo from where I had dropped it and placed it back in my pocket. I headed out of the other end of the alley and took in my surroundings. The neighbourhood continued as far as I could see in all directions, however there appeared to be nothing special or interesting to investigate. I walked on, passing through overgrown gardens and along old garden fences. As I walked through one particular garden, passing under a pretty intact climbing frame, I froze. There was a drain cover directly underneath the walkway, which made me curious. In order to gain access on a regular basis, the previous owners would not have been permitted to build such a frame so low off the ground in this spot. Plus there was a fairly large loop of metal built into the concrete surrounds, which was padlocked to the cover.
As oil began to run out, those with any sense and most importantly money began preparations to deal with the oncoming crisis. For many, this involved buying food, guns, ammo, medical supplies; anything they felt they would need to survive. The industry boomed. However there were also those who felt that they needed to protect themselves and their families further. So here and there people who could afford to built themselves bunkers or storages caches. They became commonly known as Hideouts. I was convinced that I had stumbled across one here.

>I looked around for something to try and pry the padlock off. There were a few old poles here and there, they looked like the sort that belonged to a trampoline or other equipment. However I spotted a

rusty hammer lying in the brush by a fence post, so I scooped it up and walked back to the cover. Weighing the hammer in my hand, I could tell from the spongy texture of the wooden handle that it was practically rotten. Nevertheless, I knelt down and positioned the prongs between the ground and the padlock loop. Afraid of snapping the handle, I applied pressure further down towards the hammer head, which made it exceedingly more difficult. My efforts were rewarded though; with a glorious crack the padlock broke off and soared over my hunched shoulders. I threaded my fingers around the ring on the cover and lifted it open.

>A jet black ladder bolted to the wall gleamed in the sunlight, however just a few rungs down the darkness lingered, leaving nothing but an abyss. I was a little apprehensive, I'll admit, but I pulled Lucy from off my back and used the glare from the light reflecting off the scope as a makeshift torch. There was a drop of about 20 feet down to the bottom of the shaft, with what looked like a small hatch built into the wall. I flipped the crossbow back onto my harness and positioned myself to descend. As I made my way down I removed my knife and held it between my teeth, in order to prevent any unfortunate incidents should I meet opposition down here. I dropped the last couple of rungs and landed with a splash in a puddle.
Now I really did need light down here, as the circle of daylight above me was unable to reach all the way down here. Striking a match, I stood back to inspect the hatch door. It was a similar design to those found on ships and submarines, with a metal wheel in the middle. Gripping the wheel, I leaned my weight back and was rewarded with the handle jolting towards me, becoming easier to spin with every turn. With a loud chunk, the wheel locked at the end of the screw and the door creaked open.

>Striking another match, I advanced into the interior of the Hideout. It was a basic, yet fully functional space. The room was about 20 square feet of concrete, with a musty old mat lying in the middle of the floor. Two bunk beds lined the side walls, at the far end there was a small stoveoven and fridge. Cables from the back of the appliances trailed back to a generator in the corner of the room, with an exhaust pipe running up the walls and into the ceiling. I strolled over to the stove, not bothering to open the fridge as nothing would be salvageable. I opened up the oven door and struck a match. As I did so I realised at the last second I hadn't checked the gas taps, but fortunately nothing happened, as there wouldn't have been gas after 8 years. I guess old habits die hard.

>The good news for me was there were still warning stickers on the inside of the oven, which suggested that it had just been installed, or never used. Either way meant that this Hideout was left untouched, sealed off from the decline of the world. Still in a moment of elation, I looked over at the generator. "Surely not," I thought. I walked over to the generator, knelt down, and gave the fuel tank a kick. There was a beautiful sloshing sound. A full tank.
Now I faced a problem. I couldn't carry all this fuel at once, and I wasn't going to stay here as I never stay in the same place for more than a day at most. It draws too much attention no matter how discrete you are, and looters and other malcontents are drawn to it like locusts to a crop. I pulled out my empty water bottle (I had a spare one full anyway) and released the fuel cap. A gorgeous torrent of tinted liquid poured out into the bottle. It was full to the brim in just under 2 seconds. I flipped the cap back on, locked it, then went out into the shaft. I climbed up to the penultimate rung then paused. Last thing I needed was to get my head blown off by a sniper in a nearby house. I removed the scope from Lucy and looked in the reflection. There appeared to be no houses within range with windows

facing my position. I vaulted out of the hole and took in all angles. Nothing.

>Clipping the scope back on, I made my way to the house at the top of the garden. It was the same size and style of the rest of the houses in the area, so nothing too special. I walked up to the French doors facing the garden and tried the handle. Locked shut, but that wasn't a problem, as these plastic doors became soft and malleable after constant rains and driving winds. I gripped the handle and leaned back alongside the door. The door shifted on its hinges and both doors swung freely. I could have just smashed the glass, but I didn't want any noise. I advanced into the house. I was standing in the old conservatory, through a double doorway was the lounge and on the left appeared to be the kitchen. I don't know why, but I felt that this house was worth searching. Someone who kept a fully functional Hideout at the bottom of his garden was worth investigating. As I made my way through the lounge and to the foot of the stairs, the stench of death became pungent. I knew what was waiting for me upstairs, I had come across it many times before in my travels. But I had to look and make sure I wasn't missing anything. I made my way past the children's bedrooms as nothing useful was ever kept in there. Instead I walked to the master bedroom and peered in.
The man was lying in the middle of the bed, his head lopsided and his tongue lolled out of his mouth, black as soot. There was an empty pill bottle in one hand, a sheet of paper grasped in the other. Holding my breath I dived into the room and grabbed it. Shutting the door behind me I caught my breath and read the paper:

>Tom,
I'm sorry for what I did to you, but I just couldn't stay here with the kids. You were growing increasingly disturbed â€"we were scared to sleep at night! I thought that maybe this was just a phase you were going through, but you were convinced that this was the End. Do you really think that the government is just going to let all the lights go off? I have read countless articles where scientists have described how we are going to start using Hydrogen, which is renewable! But you wouldn't believe it, you, an electrician wouldn't believe the world's leading scientists. You betrayed us all when you spent our entire savings on that stupid hole at the bottom of the garden. We never even used this 'Hideout' as you forbade us from using it until we really needed it.___

>_I am going to give you one last chance to sort this out. You need some time to gather your senses and come to the realisation that family is more important here than your hobbies.

>Always yours,
Jennifer

>This here was one of the results of the build up to the Blackout. Families torn apart by conflicting opinions. Those who were merely trying to help their families survive the crash that lay ahead were ridiculed and dismissed. Many, overcome with grief, ended up like this poor sod here. Alone and heartbroken, facing only one way to make all of it go away.

>I had had enough of this place. I made my way out through the lounge, and on the way out I noticed a filing cabinet with an unopened letter resting on the top. I noticed the logo and put it in my pocket; this needed reading later. Stepping outside, the air became clearer, the pungent smell whipped away on the currents of the wind. It was about 4 hours before sunset, and I didn't particularly fancy being in this neighbourhood at that point. Urban areas at night almost guaranteed trouble, even if you weren't looking for it. Gangs emerged from houses and buildings like rats from a sewer, skulking the streets, looking for prey. Unless you had a death wish, it was best to avoid urban environments at all costs. I stepped out onto the

street, faced west and started putting on foot in front of the other, a seemingly endless loop until I decide to stop.
The following morning arrived with no incident. I had camped inside an old trading lodge, its interior completely gutted apart from the counter in the corner. It had a back room which I used as my bedroom for the night. Not exactly 5 stars, but it was better than nothing. On the way out I stepped on a broken picture frame containing a picture of a small smiling workforce, I'm guessing at this shop. I picked it up and took a moment to have a look at it. It was strange to think that there was a time when people would work together because they wanted to make a living for themselves, not because they had to in order to survive. Scanning what was left of the shelves I noticed a quiver of crossbow bolts hidden just out of sight behind an upturned cabinet. I'm guessing they fell off when the place was turned over. I scooped them up and strapped them to the side of my pack. The thing I loved about strung weapons was they had infinite ammo (as long as you replenished your supply after use) and can be very easily maintained. This quiver now put my supply at 29 bolts, which I was more than happy with. The fewer you have then the harder it is to be effective in a fight. You can't just stop mid-way whilst you gather up your ammunition. Crushing the broken glass deeper into the cracks in the wooden floor, I made my way outside.

>The sun was just starting to break through the clouds and a wind was beginning to howl, like a pained animal. The previous night had revealed some interesting points to make towards whilst I scouted the area. On the horizon, where the road curved over the top of the hill and out of sight looked like the outskirts of a small settlement, possibly a hamlet or village. I've wandered through countless places, all of them so lifeless and uninteresting that nature was starting to reclaim them, as if it was doing it a favour and putting it out of its misery. What caught my eye about this one however, was that it was occupied. There had been light flickering in the upstairs windows of a couple of the buildings. I watched for over an hour and yet no one or anything else emerged from them. This was a good sign. Normally those I like to call Skulkers like to show themselves at night, as if they want to make their presence known. I guess it's there way of staking out their territory, or maybe it gives them a better opportunity to see incoming targets or potential threats. Either way the best time to investigate believe it or not was early morning, just as the sun starts to peer over the place.
I stepped out into the middle of the road and faced the hill. The ascent wasn't difficult as the slope climbed gradually, however dust and sand was being flung into my face by the wind, and endless barrage of tiny stings against my cheeks and hands. Reaching the top of the hill I could see that the buildings comprised of an old motel and diner on the opposite side of the road, followed by what must have been the beginning of a main street through the heart of the village. I scanned my eyes over the diner and immediately dismissed it as being occupied. It was too exposed, the walls too low and the windows non existent. The interior was blackened and some of the counters and table tops had melted in the heat of the fire. Whether the fire was started deliberately or not could not be determined, but I was not concerned about that right now. My main concern lay within the motel.

>It was the classic horseshoe layout that I had seen countless times on my travels. Parking lot in the middle, reception on the right and the rooms took up the rest of the building. There were 2 floors, ground floor looked reasonably sound whereas with the upper floors some damage had been sustained. In a few places the roof had caved in, leaving nothing but a gaping black hole. The walkway above the

ground floor doors had cracked and collapsed onto the ground below. Again I couldn't tell whether that was just natural erosion or man made. I'm not a structural engineer. I walked into the lot with my trusty crossbow in hand, checking out for signs of life. I figured the best entry point lay not in the reception area, which was pretty obvious, but in the staff only sections. Even since the Blackout most people obey signs they see, like "NO ENTRY" or "STAFF ONLY." It's almost as if it's hardwired into their brains they've obeyed it so often. I walked over to one of the doors displaying such a sign, this one informing me that it was a restricted area, and crept inside. There was a big old boiler sat in the corner, surrounded by pipes and discarded tools, looking a little bit like a mechanical heart. I guess once upon a time it was, acting like the heart of the building. A circular metal staircase wound its way up to the floor above, which I carefully climbed, as metal stairs have a tendency to creak agonisingly loud. Fortunately on this occasion it didn't, so as I reached the top I found myself facing another door, which lay wide open. I peered through the doorway and found myself overlooking the parking lot, with the shell of the diner a short distance beyond. The view from here was fantastic and gave me a great chance to see where I was heading and where I had come from.
The path I had led to get here was as bland as you can get, just a ribbon of road adorned with the abandoned car or motorbike every so often. Just within visible distance through the haze of the heat I could make out the creepy little suburb where the Hideout was. If I was to then walk another day in that direction, following the same old road I would reach the barn and the strange man with a corpse for company. I again became aware of the photo in my breast pocket, which I subconsciously pushed to one side. No time for that now.

>Something in the corner of my eye moved, I spun to look and as I did I heard something crack under foot in the next room over. I wasn't alone. Not surprising really considering I had watched someone in here for an hour last night. There are two options when faced with a potential threat who has just run into a room. You can either storm in immediately, which gives them no time to react but will mean that you could run straight into a trap if they've been there long. The other option is to plan the next step and take your time, which allows you to proceed with care but runs the risk of them getting ready to send you off to the Pearly Gates before you've even realised it. This time I decided it was best to do neither and instead enter through a different way. Motels like these have fire escapes for almost every room which are almost always sealed up. However they still work even though they have never been opened. I grabbed the door and slammed it to, jammed it shut and forced a piece of two by four under the door handle. Then I sprinted right around the corner to the fire escapes and waited, Lucy against my shoulder. Poised to strike.
It is basic knowledge in this day and age that if you are sheltering somewhere or living somewhere permanently then you should have an escape route in case Death decides to come visit you that night. I myself plan a minimum of 3, just to be safe, having one obvious route " the other two improvised and planned to be unexpected for the opposition. In this case the only way out of that room was the fire escape, which was proven a minute later when it flew open and a figure bustled out of it and into the open.

>"FREEZE!" I bellowed. Freeze is a superb word, one of the best in the English language. Said with enough force it can instil command over people who would otherwise be an adversary. As it did in this case when the figure spun round to see me and raised their hands. Judging by the build and the posture they held it seemed to be a

woman. This was confirmed when some curly and matted hair fell into the light from under her hood. She was wearing an olive green fur lined hoodie, with some torn kneeless jeans. Her leather boots appeared to be just hanging in there, no way to determine what colour they used to be. Flipping back her hood, she allowed me to see her face. Despite the dust and grime on her face she was quite a looker. Her hair was knotted and filthy, no surprise considering shampoo was just a legend these days.
It was unusual even in this day and age for a woman to be travelling alone. I began to focus on listening out for anyone else nearby, a stilled breathing, a boot crunching on broken glass; but there was nothing. Only once she was standing still did I notice she was carrying a beaten rucksack on her shoulder. I could see from here that it was bulging at the seams; in fact a couple of the stitches on one side had popped under the pressure. Either this girl was alone or someone was using her as their own personal pack mule, which I doubted upon laying my eyes on the hilt of a very large blade poking out of her jacket.

>"Toss the knife", I asked.
Her eyes flickered down to the object for a split second, then returned to oppose my stare.

>"I wouldn't really call a machete a knife," she grinned, "but what's the point? With a crossbow aimed at me from 15 feet away are you really dumb enough to think I would chance anything?"
The voice was strange, it just didn't seem to fit the person it was coming from. It was a voice and tone that belonged in the past " sweet, innocent, none of which could be used to describe the person stood in front of me. It was alien and a discomfort. I didn't like that.

>"Just toss it, then take the bag off. Slowly."
She whipped the machete out of it's pouch and dropped it at my feet. The blade bounced off the ground and would have taken off two of my toes had I not been wearing my steel toe caps. I didn't react, treating it as if it had been a feather, not a two-fucking-foot long knife. Nice trick, to an amateur it would have looked like pure coincidence that the blade bounced like that. But by the way she had thrown it, the slight angle and flick of the wrist, I knew it was deliberate, designed to maim or shock. She was trained well, clearly she didn't need looking after.

>The bag came next, but it wasn't thrown this time, it was placed down carefully. As I stood up from my position she backed up with her hands open to her sides, to show there were no weapons. I walked over to the bag and open the zip. There were some old energy bars and a couple of bottles of water that didn't look the freshest, along with spare clothes and a thick blanket, which I can only assume was the bedding. I was satisfied, so I threw it back to her, whilst putting Lucy back in her sling. Whilst the girl was putting her backpack on she asked,
"Give me the 'knife' back. Now."

>I picked up the hilt and in one casual flick, shot it like an arrow from a bow, straight through a street sign 30 feet away. The clang was deafening, sending a murder of crows screeching angrily as they flew off. The girl turned to look at me, a look of shock and awe wretched across her filthy face.
"Your dad sent me, so get your toy and follow me." I said, pointing at the still wobbling sign.

>"My dad? Mister if you met my dad then you would know he's a basket case," she replied.
"Look, if I've got to drag you back to him by your hair, then so be it."

>She stood for a minute, looking at the road ahead and the sign with her machete embedded in it, then walked to the other end of the platform, looking down the hill I'd come from. Kicking her feet a bit, she said,
"I'll come with you, but on one condition."

>"And that is?" I asked.
"That you teach me how the hell you do that," she replied, nodding to the road sign.

4. Chapter 4

Chapter 4

The next few hours were hard, most surprisingly, for me. I had never imagined that having company would be so overwhelming. Even though there was a 19 year old girl behind me it still felt as if I was being walked to my execution. I flinched at every crunch of glass, every cough, every shadow that was cast in front of me by this godforsaken girl. All that was nothing though, until she walked up alongside and started talking to me.

>"So why are you out here all by yourself?" she asked.
"I told you, your dad sent me to look for you."

>"No, I mean what were you doing before that?"
"That's none of your business."

>"I was only asking, what's your problem anyway?"
I stopped and turned to look at her.

"My problem is that I lost my entire family because one of the group we were travelling with talked too much. We were trying to leave the city, so we were making our way around through the suburbs. We were passing an old grocery store when the Skulkers ambushed us. We were outnumbered, outgunned and we had nowhere to run. They only came because of one person using his stupid gob too much. So do us both a favour and try to keep yours shut."

>As you can imagine, things went pretty sour after that. I guess this is what I would call a teenage strop that I was having to endure. It involved stomping off ahead, her hands in her pockets and head down, making sure that I could hear and see everything that was going on in front of me. Which was incredibly hard not to, considering there was nothing else to look at save the old husks of cars and the occasional rest stop by the side of the road. Noticing that our shadows were becoming more and more elongated, I craned my neck to look behind me. The sun was just kissing the tops of some mountains way off in the distance, and I was glad of this. For starters, I was fed up with the constant stomping and scuffing. Plus the temperature was due to drop to more tolerable levels. If we were in a built up area then we would have needed to find a secure site sharpish, but out here there was nowhere to hide and excellent field of view, so we could afford to keep going for a bit longer.
I like walking at night. Almost everything swings in your favour. Creatures shrink at your presence, the moon lights the way for you like its ally. In the darkness you are invisible, almost undetectable, as well as having the greatest advantage â€" the element of surprise. Ever since man invented fire there has always been this constant fear of the dark. When the light goes out there is a little jolt of panic in everyone, no matter how big or small. It takes quite a lot of experience of living and simply being in blackness before you adjust. Fortunately for me my experiences as a child were all beneficial. I used to sneak out at night and explore the woods outside my house. There was an old silver mine hidden in the woods which the locals always told their kids horrible stories about, just to make sure they never went looking for it. I however thought it would be a fantastic idea to go searching for the place in the hopes of finding myself some silver and becoming rich.

>I eventually found the mine, and found that even the dark of night

outside seemed bright compared to what lay within the mine. Inside the sounds were distorted, the flickering lights of a lantern cast disfigured shadows on the walls, but were no match for the black void that lay in wait just feet in front of me. I never did find any silver, but the mine did teach me a valuable lesson which I still respect to this day. Embrace the darkness, wear it like a coat. Else if you light the way it will retreat and reveal you, leaving you alone and exposed.
Whereas I was perfectly comfortable walking at night, it was clear that someone else wasn't. The girl jumped at every sound or movement. She was constantly looking around, trying to find some source of light, but only ended up winding herself into an even bigger panic. I didn't know the reason why she left her dad, but she had clearly done it in a hurry. Sure, she was pretty skilled with a blade, but out here, where there's not a lot else but you, she wouldn't survive. She needed to be trained to survive on her own, if push came to shove. I stopped walking and let the night envelop me.

It had only been a day, but the girl was already scared of the man. She didn't really know whether she could trust him, and judging by his calmness about just about everything, it seemed as though he knew exactly what was going to happen. It was a rare occasion when she was outclassed somehow by someone, but this guy outclassed her completely. He had picked up her machete, the same one her and her father owned for over 25 years, and expertly launched it into a road sign. A 2 inch thick road sign. She was accurate with small knives up to 20 feet, but something that big isn't designed to be thrown, it should be too unstable and inaccurate to throw. But he flicked it like he was skipping stones across water.

>It wasn't long before she became aware she was alone. Scanning her torch around the scene, the beam shattering the veil of black, there was no one, no hiding spots, nor anything else, for over 100 feet. Just the endless dust bowl they had been trudging through for the past 16 hours. She started to grow uneasy. Had he been snatched, or dragged off by some animal or something else? No he can't have been, as there would have been some sort of sound, even if he was completely silent. He couldn't have turned round and walked off the other way either, as the boots he wore made a distinctive clink-chink as he walked. The girl began to pick up the pace, hoping to try and find some shelter for the night. If the man had really left him, God help him if they ever bumped into each other again.
Suddenly tracks began to emerge out of the darkness on the road ahead. As she aimed the beam of light down, she jumped in fear. The tracks were completely inhuman, yet far too big for any animal she knew. Each footprint stretched over 2 feet in length, and consisted of 3 toes, each with prominent claw marks ahead of them. Going by the span between each print, the creature must have a height of over 15 feet. She let out a whimper, picking up the pace and making sure she kept the trail to one side of her. Maybe this was the thing that grabbed the man? As she pointed the beam up, a face lit up just inches from her face. She screamed. It was the strange man, his face as still as stone, holding his hands together in front of him. He looked at her and said,

>"So begins your first lesson."
She stared back at him in confusion. Just who the fuck was this guy?

"Your first lesson, as I'm sure you've already guessed, is how to move in a hostile environment. There is the way you move; clumsily, slow, hesitant. Any one of those factors is enough to kill you. For the past 10 minutes I have watched you swinging that torch around

like it was a baseball bat, and yet I was still able to evade you. In fact, I stood right next to you in the process. Yet you were so noisy, so clumsy you failed to notice."

>"Bullshit," the girl replied.
"Really?" the man asked, "then how did you come to lose your knife?"

>Her hand shot to her side. The machete was gone. She looked at him in disbelief.
"How is that possible? I would have noticed!"

>He grinned.
"You would have, if you weren't so focused on looking where the light was pointing." By now you should've also noticed I'm not wearing my boots. This is how I was able to get so close to you and avoid detection. The dust out here is so thick it's like sand. Wearing big boots on roads and rock is fine as it protects your feet, but at night they'll get you killed. Boots on sand will sink in, causing you to spend more energy and make more noise to keep moving. Take them off, you become like a cat â€" nimble, flexible, expending almost no energy yet achieving all your goals."

>The girl frowned.
"Right, but how do you explain the alien footprints? Those were done by you, weren't they?"

>He smiled and shone the torch on his feet. They were wrapped in frayed ends of rubber, presumably salvaged from a nearby wreck.
"In a hostile environment such as this, an inexperienced person is always on edge. You could throw a twig in front of him and it would give him a heart attack. However for someone with combat experience such as yourself, the trick is not to try and scare them straight away, but to unnerve them gradually. I could see from where I was that you were growing more and more restless as you followed the trail. Had you followed it all the way you'd have seen it lead to a hole in the ground."

>The girl turned to where the trail was, and cast the light up until it reached a small circular hole in the middle of the road. She walked over to it and shone the torch down it. There was a smell of old stagnant water emanating from it. Looking back at the man she asked,
"What's this supposed to be?"

>Pulling his pack off his back the man strode over.
"Our room for the night."

>He pulled out a climbing rope, went over and tied it to the axle of one of the old cars nearby. Running the rope along the ground and covering it with dust and grit to disguise it, he fed the other end down the hole, grabbed hold, and abseiled in. Upon reaching the bottom, he waited for the girl to abseil down, then tied the rope to the bottom.
"In case some asshole decides to try and steal my rope."

>They made their way further into the tunnel. This had once been a storm drain access point, in order to allow crews to come down and attempt to clear any blockages or make repairs. It wasn't designed for comfort or to accommodate people for long. As a result it was impossible to stand up straight; the highest the man could stand was hunched over. The floor was damp from leaking pipes, not from any recent storms though. The only storms that occur in this part of the world these days are dust storms, so the fact that there was any standing water here was a miracle.
The man looked over at the girl. She was clearing a space in the corner, getting ready to lay out her bedding.

>"Wait", the man said.
The man pulled out a clear plastic bag with sand and dust which seemed to have been collected at some point on his travels. Confused, she watched as he sprinkled the dust over the floor, leaving no spot untouched. Once he was done there was a layer half an inch thick of dirt on the floor.

>"When it comes to sleeping, I don't do a lot. But when I do I like to be relatively comfortable. And dry. The dust will absorb the water

and keep your stuff clean. When you're finished in the morning just pack up your stuff, and brush the dust off. Nice and clean."
The girl laid her bedding out, which turned out to be the remains of an old poncho, took off her jacket to use as a pillow then got ready to get in. the man pulled her machete out of his pack and took a look at the blade.

>"I guess we can skip the lesson on maintaining your weapons. It's a nice length, very well looked after. Here, keep it close."
He tossed it to her, where she then propped it against the wall by her bedding. She watched him place his pack down, where he unrolled the back, into what was clearly a cleverly disguised sleeping bag. He climbed inside, placed his head back and closed his eyes.

>"Get some rest," he said. "Lesson two starts tomorrow."
She snuggled down into her bed and closed her eyes. The girl smiled.

>"Can't fucking wait", she thought.<p>

End
file.